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SUBJECT: OSCE/PERMANENT COUNCIL: CONCERNS ABOUT UPCOMING
PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS IN BELARUS

11. Post is authorized to present the following statement at
the September 25 Permanent Council meeting in Vienna.

Begin text:

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The United States welcomed the August release of three
prisoners of conscience by the government of Belarus in the
hope that this positive gesture signaled a desire by that
government to embark on true democratic reforms and a respect
for human rights.

Such steps could lead to a significant improvement of
relations between the United States and Belarus, including
the removal of visa and economic sanctions. To signal our
support for the release of the prisoners of conscience,
Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs
David Merkel traveled to Minsk on August 21 to 23 for
discussions with Belarusian government officials and with the
democratic opposition. We temporarily suspended sanctions
against two Belarusian companies in the hope that further
positive action by the government of Belarus would allow the
United States to consider a further suspension of sanctions.

The United States and other countries have stated that
further improvements in relations will greatly depend on the
conduct of parliamentary elections on September. We are
therefore disappointed to learn of some serious shortcomings
in the run up to the parliamentary elections. The latest
ODIHR interim election report and media reports raise
significant concerns. The democratic opposition comprises
only three percent of district election commissions and less
than one percent of precinct election commissions.
Approximately twenty percent of opposition candidates have
been denied registration -- some for trivial reasons such as
the candidate who was denied registration for failure to list
ownership of a car he had sold years earlier. Some
candidates are reporting difficulty in meeting with voters
and in accessing media due to government restrictions. The
harsh limitation of 585 Euro on campaign spending prevents
candidates from printing materials and getting their message
to the voters. The state media
is largely silent on the campaign, making this an almost
invisible election.

It is too late to correct many of these problems, but there
are other areas of concern highlighted in the report that can
still be addressed before September 28. We are concerned
about reports of lax controls of the ballots during the
extensive early voting period of September 23-27 and about
official pressure on students, workers and others to cast
early votes. ODIHR has not been assured that it will be able
to observe the vote count, and it has not received
information about the number of ballots distributed or the
number of voters registered in Belarus. Without this access
and information, it will be impossible for ODIHR to assess
the accuracy of the vote tabulation.

We urge the government to take immediate steps to ensure

transparency of voting, ballot box security and vote tabulation, including during early voting. Without full access for the OSCE/ODIHR election observers in these critical areas of the election process, it is difficult to see how any effective international observation could verify the reliability of the election process, nor conclude with any confidence that meaningful improvement has taken place in Belarus over previous elections in 2006 and 2004.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

End text.

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